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Reading Hitchcock

Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze, *by William Rothman, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.*

FREDRIC JAMESON

> *Another case, and just as frequent a one, is that of conceptions of the cinema which aim to be theoretical and general but in fact consist of justifying a given type of film that one has first liked, and rationalising this liking after the event. These 'theories' are often author aesthetics (aesthetics of taste); they may contain insights of considerable theoretical importance, but the writer's posture is not theoretical. . . . A simultaneously internal and external love object is constituted, at once comforted by a justificatory theory which only goes beyond it (occasionally even silently ignoring it) the better to surround and protect it, according to the cocoon principle. . . . To adopt the outward marks of theoretical discourse is to occupy a strip of territory* around *the adored film, all that really counts, in order to bar all the roads by which it might be attacked.*
>
> Christian Metz,
> "The Imaginary Signifier"

A powerful interpretive act—in this instance, *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*, by William Rothman—is usually understood as telling us something about its subject matter; but it can also be interrogated (as will be the case here) for what it can tell us about *interpretation* as such, its conditions of possibility, what must be left out in order to include what it finally does manage to include. It tells us, too, what all this has to do with the way in which the interpretive operation constitutes a certain object of study, and a certain (institutionalizable) field of study. I am bound to see this somewhat differently, since I

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am peering over into the field from my own (whose object is verbal narrative). I have, therefore, no vested interest in this particular field, whose products I nonetheless sometimes read with a certain envy, as though it were easier to be a materialist when you had a "really" material object to work with.

Materiality is, however, not nearly so useful a concept with which to approach film criticism as that of *translation* or *transcoding*, which allow you to measure the relative difference between retelling the story of a novel and writing up the sequence of a film. Explanatory power is then proportional to the distance between the two codes (between the aesthetic language and the critical language), and much of our time, in literary studies, is spent distancing and objectifying our object of study (turning it, say, into something called narrative), so that our critical rewriting will come with a certain force or shock.

Film criticism, on the other hand, ends up reproducing some of our more traditional literary-critical problems, in particular that of the gap between part and whole, presence and totality, style and plot, in short, what Coleridge called fancy and imagination, and what I have preferred (following Deleuze and Guattari) to call molecular and molar. Nothing is more disturbing for any organic aesthetics than this methodological problem, which also turns out to be a whole historical situation and dilemma. Paradoxically, these distinct levels or dimensions are much easier to deal with when they are in contradiction with one another, or are at least doing two very different kinds of things. Conrad's impressionism, his production of a certain kind of style, is easier to isolate precisely because it is doing something relatively unrelated to, or disconnected from, his plot construction.[1] Still, inventing ways to bridge this gap (or even worse, to conceal its existence) is a privileged form of interpretation as bravura gesture and Rothman's interpretive operation, as I intend to show, is no exception to this. An equivalent gap confronts the analysis of film which must decide what to do with the individual *frame* (or, somewhat differently, with the individual *shot*). Are these the phonemes, the words, or the sentences of filmic discourse? And since neither frame nor shot are the categories through which the naive viewer experiences film, what is the epistemological advantage of a semiotic commitment to the most self-punishing frame-by-frame analysis of a given film (over and beyond the ritual of professionalism involved), as opposed to the analysis, following the suggestion of Stanley Cavell (who is following the suggestive work of Freud on dreams), of the filmic "object" as we *remember* it (including our mistakes, holes, substitutions)?

I am, however, anxious to reintroduce history back into this problem, which is not only methodological (or epistemological), but which also reflects an objective development in its object, a widening structural distance, within

1. See my *The Political Unconscious*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981, chapter 5.

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all modern cultural languages, between the micro-text and the macro-structure, or between the molecular and the molar. In *this* form, that distance (with all the methodological problems it raises for analysis and for criticism) is to be seen as a historical *event*: one which I am tempted—very hastily and prematurely, very dogmatically, if you prefer—to see as the scars and marks of social fragmentation and monadization, and of the gradual separation of the public from the private in modern times. Film, however, imposes such a historical perspective on us in a twofold, doubly complicated way: for besides the internal logic, the internal evolution and development of its intrinsic languages—from Griffith, say, to Hitchcock and on to Godard and after—it is itself a historically new cultural apparatus, whose material structure may be expected to reflect (and to express), in its very formal structure, a particular moment or stage of capital and of the latter's intensified, yet dialectically original, reification of social relations and processes.

This means that critical or interpretive solutions need always to be retheorized, in a second moment, as indices of a historical situation or contradiction. It is this second moment which is missing from Rothman's stimulating book (as from how many others?). We will rapidly assess this loss from two perspectives before we discuss its positive achievements. The question of *genre*, for example, always one of the privileged mediations between the formal and the historical, is relatively neglected (save for the emergence of romance), it being understood that genre criticism does not properly involve classification or typology but rather that very different thing, a reconstruction of the *conditions of possibility* of a given work or formal practice. The question, then, is not one of "deciding" to what genre Hitchcock's films belong, but rather of reconstructing the generic traditions, constraints, and raw materials out of which alone, at a specific moment of their historical evolution, that unique and nongeneric thing called "the Hitchcock film" was able to emerge. Genre functions to prevent embarrassing or unwanted questions from being asked; it is thus like a frame with respect to the reader's or spectator's interpretive temptations. The most obvious example of this, in genres clearly related to Hitchcock's work, is the significance of murder, a theme, problem, or subject which does not (let's be frank) unduly preoccupy us in our ordinary daily lives. To interest us in this topic, therefore, requires a certain amount of justification, which is to say, a certain amount of metaphysical rationalization (for example, "murder is the very metaphor of the human condition," or, "New York is a jungle"). The function of generic framing, as in the murder mystery, is to dispense reader and writer alike from the necessity for such rationalization: the generic label tells us that the centrality of murder is pure convention, that we will all assume in advance that this topic is important and take it from there.

We are, then, reemerging once again *from* that genre and *from* those conventions when we begin to get nervous about the unjustified (or unjustifiable) function of the theme of murder in art like that of Hitchcock, and set ourselves

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the new interpretive task of discovering the meaning of this motif ("the connection between murder and marriage is one of Hitchcock's great subjects," p. 53). At this point, however, we have to distinguish different kinds or even concepts of meaning itself. In symbolic meaning, metaphysics or authorial intention are empowered to impose a given meaning on what is otherwise a random bit of raw material. This, one would think, should be radically separated from at least two other types of meaning (which might be coordinated in the present instance): namely the genealogical, in which murder as part of Hitchcock's historical and generic raw material is accounted for as an element in his own situation, his own dilemma with which he must somehow deal; and the enabling or conditional type, in which the unique perceptions and meanings we do find in Hitchcock are somehow accounted for by the unique characteristics of his narrative and formal apparatus (including the convention of murder).

The foregoing can now be somewhat generalized so that the problematization of interpretation it implies becomes a historical dilemma in its own right. At this level of abstraction, we might begin with the fragmentation and privatization of individuals in contemporary society and with the atomization of all hitherto existing forms of community or collective life (including the values and common languages of such groups). Reception of the individual art object thereby becomes rigorously nominalistic, and shared conceptual motifs (symbols, "values") can no longer be assumed or taken for granted. The artist may adapt to this situation by producing the "open work of art," an object that can be used by anybody as they see fit. Such an object does not preselect its public (as only those who share this or that convention of meaning); it is randomly recodable as one likes. Meanwhile, as the artist is equally nominalized (situation-specific, historically and socially bereft of all claims to, or possibilities of, universality), we begin to see the production of private meanings in the work of art. This is the point, paradoxically enough, when film as an emergent cultural language and apparatus of the twentieth century assumes significant historical meaning. For it is, as Metz has instructed us, a very peculiar language indeed, a "language without a lexicon" ("this does not mean that filmic expression lacks any kind of predetermined *units*, but such units, where they do exist, are patterns of construction rather than preexisting elements of the sort provided by the dictionary"[2]). This is to say that the kinds of private language (special signifiers functioning as Lacanian "upholstery tacks") we have become accustomed to in high modernist literature are here somehow authorized by the very nature of the cinematographic apparatus itself. All of Hitchcock then becomes one immense private language, one immense chain of private signifiers, which has however become public and collec-

2. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Britton, Williams, Brewster, and Guzzetti, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 212.

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tively accessible and within which, paradoxically, at some second degree, the older modernist private signifiers again stand out. Rothman is particularly good on two of these encodings in Hitchcock: the strategic use of the overhead shot, and the even more idiosyncratic inscription in the frame of parallel vertical bars of various kinds, with which an auditory equivalent—staccato knocking—is identified.

The interpretive problem is, however, that even such private languages derive from the *recoding* of preexisting signifiers, and those continue residually to draw in their wake a laborious train of inherited meanings which must somehow be justified by the critic. It is as though the interpretive process had as its essential function the demonstration that a given spectator-reader need bring no particular form of belief-system-dogma to the reception of this particular aesthetic object. If you have to be Marxist, Freudian, theological, New-Deal-liberal, Tory, or whatever, in order to get the point of the film, then there is something "impure" about it; in other words, a "pure" filmic language, with no ideological preconditions, should be conceivable. But this means, as we shall see, that the overwhelming temptation of the interpreter is to turn all remnants of *content* back into sheerly *formal* phenomena or processes, in order to save the work.

I mentioned also a second possible approach to Hitchcock which I found lacking in Rothman's book, which provides a useful perspective from which to evaluate it. This has to do with a way of seeing and using Hitchcock's films, which, however inadmissible, tells us something about their objective properties, tells us, in other words, about their objective susceptibility to misinterpretation and misuse. But I am speaking of a time when no "serious" interpretations of Hitchcock yet existed; the very first of these was, to my knowledge, the Rohmer-Chabrol hypothesis of 1957: since Hitchcock was an Anglo-Catholic, his films were about sin and confession along the lines of Graham Greene. To parody the philosophers, then, we might say that the matter of interpretation turns on the meaning and function of the word *about*, a word that played no role in that period.

Nothing could have been more distant from the then current New Critical ideals of good reading—namely of responsible and hierarchically unifying or organic interpretation—than the valorizing through selected bravura sequences, a selectivity, which often enough resembled the rifling of a box of chocolates and the surreptitious replacement of the unwanted flavors, their undersides perforated for inspection by a thumb. Theoretical intuitions were, nevertheless, not wholly absent from such critical practice. For one thing, we dimly sensed the privileged function of certain formal constraints as the conditions of possibility for these moments of filmic "decoration." Indeed, constraint—as in the unities of French classical tragedy—also seemed to account for the persistence of the thriller form throughout these works, as well as the supplementary games Hitchcock seemed to play with himself (most dramati-

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cally in the continuous shot of *Rope* or the implacable ephemerality of the fall foliage in *The Trouble with Harry*).

This perception was not wrong, but needed to be related more dialectically to the matter of fragmentation itself. Indeed, in retrospect one is astonished by the way in which the great foreigners, the great European exiles—Nabokov and Chandler fully as much as Hitchcock himself—worked by disassemblage, taking the American misery apart in carefully framed, discontinuous episodes, sometimes as reduced as individual sentences, which then stand as the frame within which their aesthetic concerns are enshrined. It is hard to imagine an American artist greeting the "inexhaustible richness" of American daily life with the same jubilation, but it might be argued that this miniaturizing on the exile's part reveals something about daily life in the United States which the immanence of the native, under the rumbling shadow of the el-train, is unable to focus aesthetically. This has something to do with the invisibility of daily life as such, its peculiar dissolution beneath the centered gaze. And it is this problem, of the representation of daily life, of American daily life, which is addressed in a remarkable letter of Chandler's:

> A long time ago when I was writing for the pulps I put into a story a line like "He got out of the car and walked across the sun-drenched sidewalk until the shadow of the awning over the entrance fell across his face like the touch of cool water." They took it out when they published the story. Their readers didn't appreciate this sort of thing—just held up the action. I set out to prove them wrong. My theory was that the readers just *thought* they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description.[3]

Adjusting Chandler's language, we can disengage from this reflection a whole theory—illuminating with respect to both Hitchcock and Nabokov—about the artistic representation—by indirection and laterally, as it were, out of the corner of the eye—of an everyday life whose condition is the ostensible fixation of the public on the molar pretexts of plot, mystery narrative, suspense, and macro-temporality. The recipe has something in common with Proustian indirection, with the indistinctness of the Proustian present. It shares with that common source in the repression of perceptions and the incapacity to live the daily life of the present itself. This last can then become visible only when the raised index finger of the artist holds and engages the public's *esprit de sérieux*

3. Raymond Chandler, *Selected Letters*, ed. Frank MacShane, New York, Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 115.

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(even if this be sheer "diversion" and "entertainment"), so that other, radically different kinds of perceptions become marginally tolerated in the decorative field around the plot or action proper.

Since the experience of daily life is arguably related in some fundamental way to the urban (at any rate, it is clear that the *concept* of daily life is very closely related to the concept of the city as it emerges in the late nineteenth century), it may be most appropriate to convey this aesthetic problem through our impressions of cities. Notoriously disunified or random, spanning an immense qualitative range between the personal or private memory on the one hand, and the public, anonymous, institutional, or stereotypical on the other, these impressions do not necessarily and immediately appear as appropriate material for a work of art.

To restrict our evocation of a city like San Francisco to its dramatic landscape is to privilege a type of content or raw material that is little more, essentially, than our experience of the picture postcard or tourist poster. To attempt to locate a personal mediation of such material (or, using a different terminology, to position the individual subject within it) suggests operations as impersonal and anonymous as, say, the technique of parking one's car on a steep hill, of adjusting the wheel in the direction of the curb, and so forth. Operations such as these cannot be said to promise much for an aesthetic text in any medium. Nor do they seem to intersect with the other features of San Francisco. One would want to find evoked here the two- or three-storey wooden house, which overwhelms the visitor with an impression of a culture of daily life from which she is herself excluded; a network of urban routines no less privatized than those of the East Coast, yet more visible, since we see into people's kitchens or their upper windows. Sunlight is another distinctive trait which demands justice in a description of San Francisco, and in some uniquely negative or privative way, in so far as it merely marks the absence of Eastern changes of season (and their effects on daily life, as in extreme heat or heavy snowfall), and not the presence of a distinctive and radically different life in nature, as it does in Southern California.

Let us limit ourselves to these already relatively unrelated features (and many more are obviously conceivable). The first problem to arise is not that of the most appropriate way to *express* such experiences—for that already presupposes that they have been transformed *into* personal experiences. The first problem is, instead, to posit, or to attempt to locate, a space in which all of the distinct features enumerated would intersect. By our account, they fall into two distinct groups: one has to do with streets and transportation, and the other with housing.

One "objective" meeting place of these two groups of distinctive traits would then seem to propose itself, namely the *sidewalk*—a liminal area between the public and the private, the space of a transformational or transcoding movement from dwelling to transportation, which, in San Francisco, is

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strongly sensed in the passage from the floors of a house to the steepness of the street outside, an area which however still remains substantially pedestrian. Here too, however, we should try to resist the immediate temptation to formulate all this in terms of aesthetic *expression*, as though the appropriate combination of perception and verbal skill would suffice to identify and convey the peculiar stress of leg muscle, the warmth of sunlight on one's face within the freshness of the air, the commercial level of the cross street before you toward which you seem to descend. But this presupposes an aesthetic which is little more than a naming, as though, for this complex combination of sensations, there existed the possibility of some extended verbal compound which could stand as something like its noun. It is not clear that such an aesthetic has ever been coherent or of any great practical use: what is at least certain is that it does not correspond at all to the procedures of writers whom one would be tempted to take as models. Proust, for example, never directly renders a complex sensation or impression of this kind; he either describes the metaphorical term of the object in question, or inserts the perception as a break within a continuity of habit, such that the story being told is not that of the perception itself, but rather the break in a very different continuum (as when, coming down the steps of a Manhattan townhouse, an unexpected flow of sea air makes us think of San Francisco). Tricks and indirections, these, Proust's art consisting not in his capacity to render such sensations but rather in his ability to avoid doing so.

The dilemma of "expression" might plausibly (and with greater historical accuracy) be seen as a symptom of the increasing distance between subject and object in modern society, so that one is tempted to abandon the subject and to pursue the object in all its prosaic and mechanical complexity. More precision and more concreteness is obtained, for example, when we recall that the San Francisco sidewalk is not the exclusive property of the pedestrian, but is also the space where private cars are temporarily parked during the day, so that you have to walk around them, either going out into the street or negotiating whatever room remains between the nose of the vehicle and the garage door. What is, however, existentially unpleasant may be an aesthetic advantage, since this very cramping acts as a condensation that brings all our themes (the house, the slope, the street with its cars) far more closely into relationship with each other. Why does having to walk around these parked cars in San Francisco make a difference to me that it would not make in another city or town?

It is not only that what is accidental in another place is customary here, for some reason; it is also that the detour brings me in contact—when I can slip past!—with panels that are at least unconsciously more alarming than the solid masonry of the wall of an ordinary building. One has the impression that if one of these garage doors began to open for whatever reason, the innocent pedestrian bystander would run some risk of being jammed in between the hood of the car and the lid of its empty garage. In truth, our unconscious is poorly informed on all this, and it seems conceivable that these overhead doors

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are tracked so as never to extend into the space above the sidewalk proper. How *that* would be possible is then also (conceivably) explained by the peculiar tracking of the metal arm to which it is attached, one of those engineering mysteries by which pressure in one direction generates the zigzag of a returning leverage in the other, elbow geometries of a type unknown to us. This puzzlement is then contained by the more permissible enigma of the long distance operating mechanism, whose detached and portable box allows you to switch television channels or turn the whole thing off entirely from your bed. The push-button servo-mechanism of the overhead garage door is not only similar, it occupies the same typological slot (the only two known exemplars!) in the unconscious as the across-the-room television channel finder. It can also more grandly govern outer space, as when it stages a majestic harmony between the Cadillac turning into the street and the garage door rising slowly in the distance; it is not as elegant as a liner berthing or the Concorde in flight, but is perhaps more deeply characteristic of the third machine age. It is also far more sculptural of urban space, relating two gadgets and organizing a multidimensional event, rather than determining the style of a *single* object in motion through the void. This would then be a mode of perceiving the garage door mechanism in terms of the "sublime," where the pedestrian fear of having it open on you would correspond either to farce or to *film noir.*

I have traced all these connections and followed all these complicated wires in order to affirm a scandalous (or perhaps grotesque) proposition, namely that daily life in San Francisco is first and foremost *that*—the overhead garage door and the steeply sloping sidewalk, the gentrified three-storey wooden house rising vertically, and the traffic heading down and over the hill. It is, first of all, important to underscore the impersonal or reified zone of what is only in a secondary way a personal experience: rarely does one evolve one's own unique, personal style of dealing with cans or with home appliances. Until we become angels, or achieve Utopia, there will necessarily persist this core of purely material and anonymous, I would like to say antipersonal, constraint within our own personal commerce with the urban-industrial landscape.

That the latter can never be *transparent*—after the fashion of private or personal, psychological experience (the kind we think of as being "real life")—does not mean, however, that such activities do not contain a whole cluster or constellation of significant themes, some of which have already been developed here: private versus public and the seams between those realms, a sedimentation of machinery from transportation of a now older variety (the internal combustion engine) to action-at-a-distance mechanisms, two kinds of space, in which one dwells and in which one travels, the shout in the street versus the dim stillness of a furnished interior. The paradox is that the more meaning (allegorical or otherwise) conferred on inert mechanisms, anonymous sidewalks empty of people, blank facades that belong to somebody else, the easier such "symbols" allow themselves to be incorporated into the work of art.

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Two distinct problems are thereby posed for the aesthetic appropriation of such material: it must not be impoverished to the point of meaning something in this transparent or abstract sense, and it must avoid an aesthetic of personal expression, as when I try to render *my* New York by evoking the smooth rising and dipping of cars sweeping at fixed distances from one another down the great north-south avenues of Manhattan, or *my* Paris as the springy impact of a French vehicle on the cobbled section of a boulevard, the new humming of the tires on its paving stones.

There exist, however, other ways of conveying these materials of daily life of which we have said that they are something like the blind spot at the heart of our own present, of our own experience: an objective reality at which you cannot gaze directly without finding it dissolved into its elements, but which stubbornly reconstitutes itself in the corner of the eye when the latter officially fixes *something else.* The form that this process would take in culture is suggested by Hitchcock's work, and I have indulged the San Francisco example at such length because it is precisely this material that is mobilized in his last film, *Family Plot*—one of the two great Hitchcock evocations of San Francisco (the other being, of course, *Vertigo*). I am not aware of a Hitchcock film set in Los Angeles; but one of the dimensions of his work which is important to me (and omitted almost entirely from Rothman's book and most others on this director) is the intimate relationship between the American films at least and place as such: midwestern fields, Mount Rushmore, Quebec City, Phoenix, Bodega Bay, Vermont, Harlem, not to speak of the Riviera, Covent Garden, or the Albert Hall.

What *Family Plot* allows us to witness, as though in a small-scale laboratory situation, is the mechanism whereby the thriller generates a secondary representation of daily life by absorbing the peculiarities of the overhead garage door into the plot proper, exploiting the subliminal anxiety aroused by the lack of windows in the door panel by stationing the telepathic heroine outside in the street, while the strategic space indoors is marked by the hostage in the basement. The chain of associations we have traced in connection with the San Francisco sidewalk and its mechanical adjuncts is here transferred to the local and "degraded" peripeties of the suspense story. The latter, clearly, do nothing to articulate the meanings of the space of daily life as such. Indeed, they would seem to distract us from any form of attention (aesthetic or sociological) to the latter, at least until we recall Chandler's account of a form of representation which operates precisely by way of distraction. Then one comes to admire Hitchcock's eye for the peculiarly invisible yet material nodes in which daily life can be detected: an eye and an immobile gaze that—in a manner not unlike Bruno's stare from the tennis bleachers, which might be taken as its allegory—fixes us ever more insistently from out of the extraneous dynamics of the plot.

Alfred Hitchcock. North by Northwest. *1959.*

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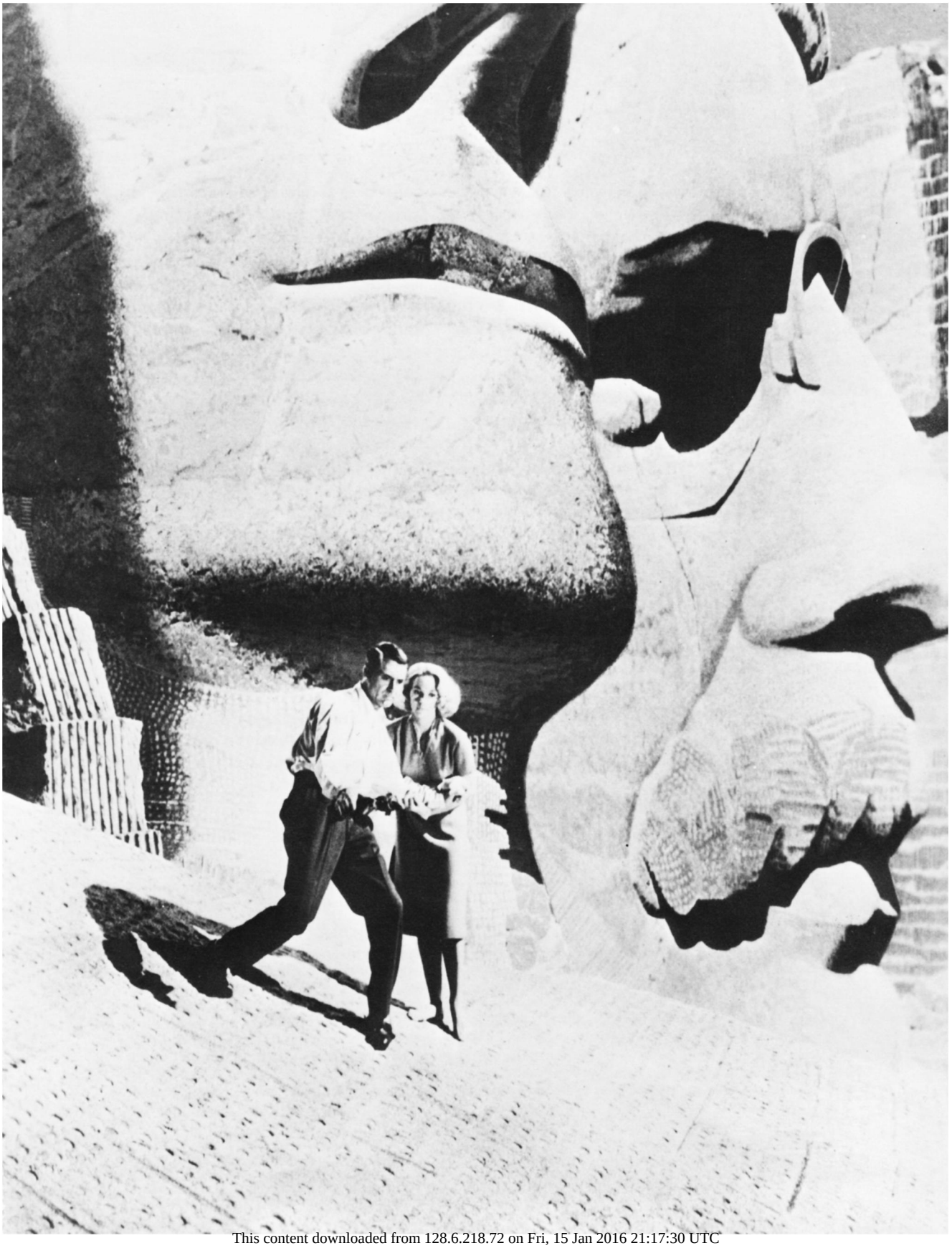

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Rothman's approach tends to reify his subject at the level of the *auteur*, of "genius," not as the capacity to register and process certain kinds of raw material with a rare optical or sonorous range. Our discussion of the form involves, then, a laborious or clumsy shifting of gears into a discussion of content. The five splendid readings of Hitchcock films which he gives us are of course rigged with a view toward Rothman's own interpretation of Hitchcock as a serious artist intent on making philosophical (and psychological) statements on evil, statements far more readily authorized by *The Lodger*, *Murder!*, and *Shadow of a Doubt* than by *North by Northwest* or *The Lady Vanishes*. The strategy of containment that frames all this in terms of Hitchcock's "genius" influences the form of Rothman's essay: it is as though the centering of his analyses on what is currently called the phenomenon of mastery in Hitchcock results, by way of the mirror drama of criticism itself, in the exercise of an analogous mastery in Rothman's own readings—the assumption of an impressive, admirable, often even enviable authority which is also intellectually and theoretically disturbing, and which I want to question.[4]

Rothman's book is, however, more than a collection of analyses: it tells a story and models an evolution or trajectory from *The Lodger* (1926)—taken as a first, already mature statement of Hitchcock's thematics and aesthetics ("not an apprentice work but a thesis, definitively establishing Hitchcock's identity as an artist" [p. 7])—all the way to *Psycho* (1960), which marks "the end of the era of film whose achievement *Psycho* also sums up, and the death of the Hitchcock film" (p. 255). The choice of crucial exhibits, then, stakes out a Hitchcock rather different from that of the adventure thriller (although the formal contribution of *The Thirty-nine Steps* is strategically recognized in a central analysis). This is not the psychoanalyzing or depth-psychological Hitchcock, of

4. Raymond Durgnat's, *Strange Case of Alfred Hitchcock*, Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1974, to my mind the only book of comparable quality to this one (if one does not count Raymond Bellour's important articles on the subject), is a useful corrective to Rothman's in many ways: first, for Durgnat's skepticism about Hitchcock's profundity; second, for his (prestructuralist) willingness to entertain the idea that Hitchcock's work, rather than expressing a single coherent ideology or philosophy, might, in fact, be a space in which a host of incompatible, inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory ideologies move; and third, for his sensitivity to something about which Rothman (and many other comparable American intellectuals and critics) is almost wholly color blind, namely social class. For a single striking example, one's whole reading of *The Lodger* is transformed by a fact never mentioned in Rothman's elaborate analysis, namely that the lodger is an upper class visitor to Daisy's milieu, and that their romance is an interclass fraternization. It is true that Durgnat is one of the rare Englishmen to have written about Hitchcock and might thus be expected, a priori, to be aware of the indications of class more readily than American or French viewers, but this is in itself an interesting lesson, as though in cultural importation and transplantation, in the translation of cultural artifacts to alien national situations, what travels the least well, what evaporates or becomes invisible more rapidly than any other code or connotation, is that of social class.

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Spellbound or *Marnie*; and is finally distinct from the self-transcending Hitchcock of *Vertigo* ("Hitchcock's masterpiece to date, and one of the four or five most profound and beautiful films the cinema has yet given us"[5]), or of *The Birds* (whose selection as the ultimate or "last" Hitchcock film would have modified the story Rothman has to tell).

That story can best be approached initially by way of a rather traditional problem, whose permutation provides the theoretical originality of Rothman's book. This is the problem of identification, whose literary-critical formulation takes the form of Jamesian point of view and of the nature and function of irony—critical concepts which, in the general atmosphere of poststructuralism and postmodernism, have rapidly come to be seen as ideological and archaic, reflecting a metaphysics of the individual subject or a whole aesthetics of a now extinct high modernism.

This whole problematic of identification and empathy would seem to run several distinct dangers. If one pulls it in the direction of verbal narrative and Jamesian point of view in its classical sense, then the question of our identification with the character through whose eyes and experience one is made to perceive a set of events becomes a fatally moral or moralizing one. For one thing, the ethical status of the subject of the point of view must be neither too wicked nor too preternaturally superior to support identification. Then there is the possibility of an on-going identification which proves to have been developed on the basis of false premises, or else the alternate possibility of a point of view which, in our own superiority, we reject from the outset, while viewing the action through the unsatisfactory medium of limited vision. The oft-rehearsed mode of irony thus drearily confronts us once again.

In film, however, the visual nature of the medium alters the fundamental data of the problem (since point of view in the strictest sense of seeing through a character's eyes—as in *Dark Passage* or *The Lady in the Lake*—has been a very marginal narrative procedure indeed). Now, where it is a matter of *looking at* the body or features of an actor, something like a whole psychology would seem to displace the ethical framework of the more literary version of the problem, and raise issues, equally false but different, of facial expression, the mirror stage, intersubjectivity, and the like. What is suspicious about both ethical and psychological perspectives is their apparent willingness, in the last analysis, to ground their analyses in some conception of human nature; hence the usefulness of the newer Lacanian permutation of all of this, the concept of suture, in which identification is less the effect of some a priori harmony between my own ego and some external representation of the identity or per-

5. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films*, New York, Paperback Library, 1970. Wood's judgments and reactions are probably, of all the Hitchcock criticism I have read, the closest to my own personal ones.

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sonality of another, than of my mesmerization by the empty place of interpellation, as in the returning gaze, from the open screen, of the shot/reverse shot as that empty place becomes ambiguously associated both with myself as spectator and with the other character/interlocutor.[6] This more rhythmic and formal conception of identification as process tends, however, by radically dissolving the link to any given protagonist or star, to liquidate the problem rather than to solve it.

At first glance, Rothman's staging of the issue of identification would seem to have distanced us fundamentally from the more literary problem of point of view. The mystery of *The Lodger* is no doubt a matter of inside knowledge and privileged information, but it is dramatized in terms of the limits of the visual itself, the necessary and structural externality of the camera, the fact that a face can finally never tell us anything we want to know, nor can it even confirm what we have learned of a certainty from some other source. The close-up, in other words, tends by its own logic to strengthen an uncertainty the plot itself may have already attempted to dissolve (as when we learn that neither the lodger—Ivor Novello—nor the Cary Grant of *Suspicion* are really murderers):

> The next sequence begins by fading in on the lodger, who looks right at the camera, a smile on his lips. This shot compels us to recognize that we do not really know who this man is or what he wants. For all we know, the mother's suspicions are accurate and he is a murderer. The shot culminates the film's intimations, to this point, that the lodger is the Avenger, and that he has a bond with the camera. With a knowing look he meets the camera's gaze, as if he penetrated our act of viewing him and were acknowledging complicity with the author of the film. It is as if Hitchcock himself, wearing the mask of Ivor Novello, were meeting our gaze and smiling as recognition dawns on us . . . (pp. 29–30).

It is this "relationship of externality" between the camera and the human face which will then, incidentally, explain the privileged status of Cary Grant as the Hitchcock male star par excellence:

> It is as if Grant has made a pact with the camera: his face may be filmed as long as the camera does not stare long and hard at it or let its focus go soft. And this corresponds to a pact he appears to have made with the world: others may view him as long as they do not

6. See Stephen Heath, "On Suture," in *Questions of Cinema*, London, Macmillan, 1981, as well as the texts of Miller and Oudart in *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Winter 1977–78), and those of Dayan and Rothman himself in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976.

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> display their desire for him; in return, he will not display his feelings. Yet Grant finds himself continually gazed upon in ways that perplex and disturb him. He has a whole repertory of ways of addressing others' uncircumspect looks, and an equal repertory of ways of addressing the camera's gaze . . . (p. 122).

This function, however, in which a certain use of the camera meets an actor peculiarly suited to it, will begin to emerge only after *The Thirty-nine Steps*, as we shall see in a moment. What must, according to Rothman, intervene before this fuller development is the moment of *Murder!*, in which similar thematics are played out as it were in the third rather than the first person, or in other words in a film that lacks a protagonist either of the type of *The Lodger* or of that of *The Thirty-nine Steps*.

Murder! stages a conventional separation between the inquiring consciousness (the actor-director Sir John, played by Herbert Marshall) and the guilty consciousness (revealed to be the transvestite/mulatto Handell Fane), whose culpability will pose many of the same problems of judgment as the later, more richly developed "cases" of Uncle Charles (*Shadow of a Doubt*) and Norman Bates (*Psycho*). Characteristically, Rothman takes the sexual ambiguity of this figure as the expression of some more metaphysical (and generalizable)

> vision of nothingness . . . charged with images of death and with signifiers of the realm of human sexuality from which Fane is irrevocably estranged. The vision of nothingness sums up Fane's nature in his own and—as he imagines—in Diana's eyes. It is also Fane's vision of his own death. Death is Fane's mark. In the world, he represents death, and only his own death can release him from his curse (p. 92).

It may be wondered whether any interpretive code—no matter how ultimate from any common-sense perspective (as that of death presumably is)—can be invoked in this unmediated way without dogmatism. In fact, Rothman has several supplementary turns in store for us, including the reading of Fane's suicide that immediately follows this passage, in which he glosses one of the most extraordinary moments in all Hitchcock. This is the moment when the guilty trapeze artist, noose around his neck, executes himself in full public view during a performance in the big tent (dropping, however, *out of the frame* and out of sight of the camera):

> As with all suicides, Fane's suicide is a private act admitting no audience. . . . On the other hand, Fane does perform his suicide in the most theatrical way possible in a public arena before an audience that is hushed, waiting for the death-defying climax of his act. Fane's private act of suicide is also a consummate piece of theater that brings down the house (pp. 93–94).

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At this point, however, the thematics of death is no longer an ultimately determining interpretive code in its own right, but has itself been reinterpreted in terms of something which will become far more central to Rothman's analyses in the remainder of the book. It might be well to distinguish, at this point, Rothman's readings from those of Chabrol and Rohmer, in which the public immolation of the villain (think also of the raised arms, impaled on a spotlight, at the end of *I Confess*, or the agonizing conclusion of *Saboteur*, later transferred to a very different type of figure) is taken as the "imitation" of Christ on the cross, and as the mark of redemption of the sinner (read: the Catholic characters, as opposed to the righteous or "innocent" Protestant protagonists, who do not even have a knowledge of sin). I believe that theological elements are not absent from Rothman's interpretation, but his reading is, at this particular step in the interpretation, far more richly mediated than the Anglo-Catholic one.

It also has the merit of explaining why, in spite of Hitchcock's own stated convictions as to the lack of interest of the whodunit as a form, and his own evident substitution of the adventure-thriller for the detective story as such, *Murder!* should have retained this second formal framework, in which Sir John—the official protagonist of the film, unlike the occasional detectives and explainers of other Hitchcock works—has the self-appointed function of the investigator of the mystery. Yet we have also observed that Sir John is an actor-director, and must go on to mention the "play within a play" whereby he cinches Fane's guilt.

It is indeed the whole thematics of the theater and of theatricality which will provide the key mediation here, and which, as Rothman observes, "plays a role" in the self-definition of contemporary film far beyond the work of Hitchcock alone. But where the explicit and ostensible conflict is between the sophistication of the city actors and the more popular and collective mode of life of the circus troupe as in Bergman's *Naked Night* (1952), the circus is here assimilated to the theater itself, while the operative distinction is only implicit: that between theatricality (silent movie acting, expressiveness, rhetorical speeches) and *filmmaking* proper, for which, in the famous phrase, "actors are cattle," and whose supreme and emblematic figure is not the film "star" but rather the film's director himself. All this is strikingly underscored by the climactic suicide of *Murder!*, whose theatrical "untruth" suggests that it is an act for a public, which will have *witnessed* this event, while its filmic "truth" lies in the way in which Fane drops out of the camera's sight and in which his essential mystery is preserved and perpetuated beyond all visibility.

The same evaluative axis explains the peculiar status of Sir John, virtually the only significant Hitchcock character who is the object of *irony* in its old-fashioned New Critical, Jamesian or high modernist sense.[7] (Indeed, one of the

7. With the signal exception of the James Stewart figure in *Rear Window*. But I find Donald

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interesting ways of reexamining Hitchcock's evolution would involve the positioning of a "break" with such now traditional forms of ironic point of view, and the emergence of a new narrative language "beyond" irony.) Sir John, in other words, imagines that the writing of a "play within a play" constitutes an index of truth or of correspondence to reality, of truthful representation, since it in fact solves the mystery. He thereby becomes guiltier, although in a very different way, than the ostensible villain, Fane himself, for he now implicitly claims rivalry with Hitchcock himself, as the Absolute Spirit or demiurge of the film as a whole. Hence the peculiar and significant framing of a "happy end" on stage rather than in the film itself, as Rothman perceptively demonstrates. This film has a properly theatrical hubris which consists of its imagining that it can understand other people (most notably, the guilty), and which thereby competes dangerously with the supreme—but absent—power of the director himself. It is this particular element which is, as I suggested above, susceptible to a theological reading, in which Hitchcock is the absent deity of this filmic universe and in which such a play of romantic irony (in the stricter sense developed by the Schlegels, and also significantly revived by Nabokov) has religious overtones. This possibility of reappropriation by a theological reading strikes me as a flaw and an objective weakness in Rothman's work; it is, however, of a piece with everything that is perceptive in it as well, and is, if not qualified, then at the least "complexified" by the later chapters, to which I now turn.

The reading of *The Thirty-nine Steps*, as I suggested above, will, after this particular exercise in third-person narrative, return us to the mystery—the undecidable question of the possibility or impossibility—of some first person narrative via the close-up of the hero's face. It should be noted in passing, however, that Rothman here also briefly turns to another feature of Hitchcock's work which has been excluded from his own book (owing primarily to his choice of examples), namely the matter of romance, the emergence of the couple as hero, which he usefully relates to generic developments in Hollywood film at about the same period (pp. 132–134).

The central thesis of Rothman's analysis, however, and the decisive move

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Spoto's argument—that the four Stewart films are to be taken as a totality—most persuasive and illuminating. In *Rope* (1948), Stewart "is the dubious Cadell, a man whose weak leg and slight limp manifest an inner moral weakness. In *Rear Window* (1954), Cadell's limp becomes Jeffries's broken leg and the period of recuperation reveals a pathetically vulnerable and morally suspect view of life and relationships. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), he portrays Ben McKenna, a domineering husband who knows too much for his own and his family's good. And in *Vertigo* (1958), he is Scottie Ferguson, forced to retire from detective work because of acrophobia that points to more serious spiritual problems." Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock*, New York, Hopkinson and Blake, 1976. In the present context, I would want to use this idea to argue that the ironic, or high-modernist positioning of the Stewart figure of *Rear Window* is also dissolved by the evolution of Hitchcock's form over the four Stewart films.

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in the argument his book has slowly been building, has to do with the originality of Robert Donat's acting, or better still, with the originality of his face and person as the support and medium of the camera's new aesthetic possibilities. These last, however, we are now in a position to understand as constituting themselves *against* theater and theatrical acting, in some positive and "specific sense that we do not admit the possibility that [Donat] is putting on an act for the camera or for himself" (p. 119). Paradoxically, this failure to stage one's self with a view toward other people's perception is also the fundamental condition of the moviegoer's *identification* with Hannay/Donat, so that at this point our earlier problem returns with a vengeance:

> Even in its appropriation of Hannay's point of view the camera asserts a separation from him that is, paradoxically, a condition of his status as a figure of identification. We cannot understand the achievement of *The Thirty-nine Steps* if we assume that identification with a figure on the screen is merely an effect. Our bond with Hannay/Donat is no illusion caused by the workings of a mechanism. To acknowledge this bond, we must be prepared to address such questions as who or what the camera reveals Donat to be, who or what Hannay is, what Hannay's world is, and who or what *we* are, that we heed the call to imagine Donat in Hannay's place. What imagining oneself in another's place comes to and what a figure of identification is are questions that underlie *The Thirty-nine Steps* and all Hitchcock's work (p. 114).

I have quoted this rather inconclusive passage, both to prepare a more decisive response to it, and to sharpen some of the differences between Rothman's critical operation in this book and those of a more semiotic or continental criticism, since I assume the unidentified polemic references to the working of a mechanism to be allusions to the suture debate in which Rothman participated, and which in turn revolves around the currently fashionable problem of the so-called death of the subject. As this last is generally formulated in a metaphysical way and as an essentially metaphysical problem (Is the ego coherent? Is consciousness something like a substance, or on the contrary something more like an effect?), it does not seem very productive to take sides on the matter, except to observe that the criticism and interpretation generated on either side of this divide will differ greatly from each other. The assumption of the stability and integrity of a conscious subject (in Rothman's book, the place of that supreme coherence will be called "Hitchcock"), will produce a form of interpretation in which the coherence of a given aesthetic artifact will ultimately be shown to emit a coherent philosophical message, while interpretation from the standpoint of the decentered subject will tend to register the work (or the former work, the text) in terms of what are symptomatic meanings of various kinds.

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Rothman's position, interestingly enough, takes him in a historical and sociological direction which he finally does not explore: *The Thirty-nine Steps* will, after all, be the last work in this study which rehearses the problem of identification around a figure who is not putatively guilty (later on: Uncle Charles or Norman Bates), but around an innocent figure, the protagonist of the film. Identification (or irony) can therefore not be secured by content markers of any kind (either Charles's actual guilt, or Sir John's theatrical hubris), but depends on something else:

> In the figure of Hannay/Donat, Hitchcock creates his first complete protagonist and figure of identification, the first of a long line of Hitchcock heroes. . . . In this film, Hitchcock makes judgements of his human subjects and calls for agreement with these judgements. First and foremost, he calls upon us to accept his judgement that Hannay/Donat is a figure with whom we may identify. Those who accept this comprise Hitchcock's audience. . . . *The Thirty-nine Steps* insists on a continuity between its protagonist and the figure of the lodger. Yet Hannay/Donat also represents a decisive break with the lodger in the fundamental respect that, from the outset, Hitchcock wants us to recognize him as innocent, possessed of no dark secret. However, while we know everything we need to know about this figure to know that he is no mystery to us, we know next to nothing about him as a *character*: our faith that we know him and the camera's respect for his privacy are intertwined. . . . *Within that unknownness that is inseparable from our "knowledge" of a star, Hitchcock discovers a disturbing mystery* (p. 113, italics mine).

The filmed face, which emerges as a commodity along with the star system itself, is, as Edgar Morin and others have shown us, something like a materialist version of what the movies substitute for theatricality or for what Benjamin called aura. Much of Rothman's analysis could be rewritten or remobilized in the service of an interpretation of Hitchcock's work as an implicit commentary on the commodity form itself (and on film as the privileged aesthetic apparatus of a society for which "the image has become the final form of commodity reification" [Guy Debord]).

Rothman does not, however, pursue this particular direction, and his alternative is an instructive one. For one thing, we now achieve something like a definitive formulation of the role and function of the villain in Hitchcock, in this case, the Professor, with his well-known missing finger: "Hannay is oblivious of the Professor's design, but the Professor is no less oblivious than Hannay of Hitchcock's, which mandates Hannay's miraculous escape and the Professor's final defeat" (p. 143). The Professor is thus clearly a reincarnation of Sir John, with all of the latter's authorial and theatrical hubris, with this signal difference: Hitchcock has now been able to abandon the cumbersome mode of

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irony and to mark the Professor as an official villain, whose "real" crime is not the incomprehensible conspiracy of the film but rather the more overweening attempt to usurp the place of God himself (in the filmic situation, of Hitchcock).

As the grand lines of Rothman's interpretation thus begin to emerge, other issues are clarified as well, most notably the nature, until now ill-defined, of the filmic alternative to theatricality, or in other words, the originality of screen acting as such, as opposed to the vice of the theatrical, with its perpetual self-consciousness and self-staging:

> But the real author of [the climactic scene, the murder of Mr. Memory by the Professor] can only be Hitchcock. Mr. Memory and the Professor act as they must, given Hitchcock's design. Hannay also plays the role Hitchcock calls upon him to play. Hannay is, as always, free; his act is not dictated by his nature. One last time, he finds himself within a situation he did not create. I have been calling Hannay's acting "improvisation" to register that he acts freely and yet is at every moment framed. What is unprecedented is Hannay's unselfconscious acceptance of this condition, the other face of Robert Donat's graceful acceptance of being filmed (p. 167).

But at this point, and given the terms of this discussion, it becomes clear that we are on the point of leaving the problem of actor and character—and of identification as such—behind for a rather different one, that of the presiding intelligence of the film, of its demiurge and of our relationship to *him*, which Rothman, in the Hegelian tradition, characterizes as a matter of *recognition*.

Rothman's discussion of *Psycho* is both the climax of this stage of his argument, and its unexpected permutation, so that I will proceed to it at once without consideration of the fine chapter on *Shadow of a Doubt*, which in some ways merely recapitulates the themes already indicated, although it also makes a provocative case for this film as *the* quintessential Hitchcock film (not, as I've already suggested, the Hitchcock that happens to interest me the most). *Psycho* will, however, recast all this, not merely in the way in which Norman Bates becomes the ultimate bearer of that mystery of otherness whose stages were the Lodger, Fane, the Cary Grant of *Suspicion*, and the Uncle Charles of *Shadow of a Doubt*; but also, and even more significantly, on account of the virtual disappearance of the last of the positive protagonists, the last of the trusting love partners—not to speak of the detective-investigator of the Sir John type. All of which should then logically ensure the primacy of the question of the director, and the displacement of our interest away from characters and their more theatrical properties to the supreme mystery of the authorial consciousness itself.

At this point, however, a dramatic reversal takes place, one which should

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give a certain aid and comfort to the defenders of the "death-of-the-subject" position. When the hitherto intelligible unities of the characters begin to be questioned, the "Hitchcock" power behind the camera also loses its anthropomorphic properties. The emergent theme of "filmic knowledge," as distinct from theatrical staging and as associated with the authority of the movie director himself, suddenly becomes radically *impersonal.* The informing power of *Psycho* is no longer a conscious deity with whom one plays Nabokovian games, but rather something very different and far more material, namely the camera apparatus itself.

This is indeed what the single most dramatic analysis in Rothman's book—the lengthy bravura piece on the shower scene (pp. 292–310)—undertakes to demonstrate: "Marion's shower is a love scene, with the shower head her imaginary partner, inhumanly calm and poised, and the shower head is also an eye. Marion's murder is a rape, and it is also a blinding" (p. 292). Yet the shower head is only the initial figure for the camera in this scene, in which a bewildering series of displacements insists over and over again upon the camera's violence. Thus, "Marion's open mouth is also an eye," in the moment of the attack (p. 300), as is, finally and most evidently, the drain down which her blood flows, and which echoes her own dead eye. Meanwhile the camera's autonomous movements throughout this scene, whose purposeful logic corresponds to no anthropomorphic point of view, testify to the primacy and independence of this peculiar apparatus, in which machinery and perception are more effectively and symbiotically linked than mind and body.

If this is so, however, and even allowing for the depersonalization of the director, who has here become a mechanical apparatus and a mechanical power, a most peculiar conclusion must be drawn, which Rothman does unhesitatingly: the author of this murder is more than analogous, he is virtually at one with the author of the film itself.

Norman, then, *is* Hitchcock—whatever that verb might mean. What we can note is the way in which the most horrific and immediate scene in motion picture history—which has at best been admired for its quasi-pornographic expertise in the manipulation of violence—acquires a *meaning*:

> We are not yet prepared to speculate, for example, on whether to regard this monstrous figure as Norman or his mother. But it has to be clear that this figure stands in for Hitchcock. In this theatrical gesture, the camera and the creature that unveils itself by drawing back the curtain are in complicity. Someone real presents to us the views that constitute *Psycho*, and at this moment that "someone" confronts us with his unfulfilled appetite and his wish to avenge himself on us (p. 299).

At this point, however, everything falls into place and the various elements of Rothman's preceding analyses are suddenly and unexpectedly, retroactively,

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unified. In particular the Outsider around whom so many of these films turn—the lodger, Fane, Uncle Charles, Norman himself—proves to have been not merely the expression of a particular theme or obsession of aesthetic interest to Hitchcock, but more than that, the very inscription of Hitchcock himself (and his demiurgic function) *within* the film: "the lodger has assumed a position in the frame that declares his status as a mysterious incarnation of the author's agency and our viewing presence. Staring into the frame, possessing it with his gaze, he is the camera's double as well as its subject" (pp. 45–46). It is as though, in some peculiar dual inscription, two plots and two whole sets of characters, two distinct and fantasmatic narratives, here momentarily coincided: one set is the official fiction, the story *within* the film—with its victims, detectives, murderers, witnesses and the like; the other is a quite different dramatic or narrative relationship which involves a creator (Hitchcock), his

Alfred Hitchcock. Family Plot. *1976.*

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surrogates and his rivals, and (presumably) his audience. Every so often (or even perhaps throughout?), these two narrative lines share a common occasion, and come to simultaneous expression within a given shot or scene.

Presumably, then, we are also present somewhere in such a complex and auto-referential apparatus; and indeed, the designation of our own place is not long in coming:

> If this is a demonstration addressed to Marion, it is also a theatrical demonstration addressed to us. Just as we are about to unleash an attack, we are also its victim. The author of *Psycho*, a creature of flesh and blood, stands before us threatening vengeance. . . . In the scene that ensues, we join with Hitchcock in subjecting Marion to a savage assault unprecedented in its violence, while Hitchcock also avenges himself on those who fail to acknowledge him. The author of *Psycho* declares his separateness from us, yet calls upon us to acknowledge that the agency presiding over the camera is within us as well (p. 301).

Yet all this had been present in *The Lodger* as well, whose lynch-mob scene (in which Hitchcock makes one of his brief signature-appearances) also, according to Rothman, inserts the public into the spectacle offered it: "The harrowing image of the lodger and the mob is a paradigm, if an enigmatic and paradoxical one, of the relationship between the lodger and the Avenger and the relationship between Hitchcock and us. The relationship between author and viewers, it declares, is at one level a struggle for control" (p. 53). Meanwhile, "if we have faith in Hitchcock, we may assume that our violent struggle with him will be transmuted into a kind of marriage. *The Lodger* in fact establishes marriage as Hitchcock's other key metaphor for the relationship of author and viewers" (p. 53). (This is, incidentally, the explanation for the enigmatic remark about "murder and marriage" quoted above: the two are related, not in and of themselves, but because *both* are *figures* for the relationship of creator and moviegoer.)

We have not yet, however, found our ultimate figural place within this filmic universe. Hitchcock aggresses us, this is some first intuition; that he does so with images seems more complicated to follow until we realize that the latter are sheer light and begin to recall the series of displacements in which, throughout Hitchcock's work, lights—but especially flashbulbs—are used virtually as guns, most notably at the climax of *Rear Window* but also in the photography scene in *Shadow of a Doubt*. Now we return to the flashing light at the climax of *Psycho* itself:

> Is it that this flashing only casts a spell in which what is lifeless appears to come alive, in which an illusion of magic is conjured? The following shot, the final one of the sequence, is a reprise of the grin-

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> ning death's head—but with the frame flashing black and white and divorced from Lila's point of view. . . . In retrospect, our view of the swinging bulb is likewise disclosed as representing the gaze emanating from these empty eye sockets. "Mrs. Bates," like Marion, like Lila, like us, is a viewer, held spellbound as if by a film. Indeed, Mrs. Bates' views are the very views that hold us in thrall. The mummy's private film and the film that casts its spell over us cannot be separated. This withered corpse is one of Hitchcock's definitive representations of his films' viewers. *We* are this mother who commands death in the world of *Psycho* and who is possessed by death (p. 330).

Meanwhile, it should be added that it is the very explicitness of the representation, the articulation by which the inner plot (the murder) is made to express the outer one (our visit to the movie theater), which accounts for the peculiar status of *Psycho* in Hitchcock's work, as something of a summa and a testament.

*

Now it is time to evaluate this elaborate and ingenious interpretive schema. To declare it true or false would be frivolous. What must be said of it first of all is that it is an *allegorical* interpretation, something noted explicitly by Rothman here and there in passing: "*Psycho* is an allegory about the camera's natural appetite" (p. 255); "*The Thirty-nine Steps* is a fantasy or allegory about the condition of spectatorship" (p. 117). We have already noted some of the advantages of this allegorization of thriller films, which raises them from their seemingly immediate consumption in relief or suspense and promotes them to the more philosophical dignity of *meanings*. On the other hand, it cannot be claimed that the allegorical method has been officially rehabilitated, has regained its medieval dignity, even though in practice it seems everywhere in wider and wider use. We need to know, therefore, why allegorical interpretation should not simply be considered a facile or lazy way of applying meanings to a text; and also, in the present context, why, confronted with a host of different types of allegorical meanings or codes, Rothman should have felt himself authorized to select this particular one, which I have described as auto-reflexive (that is to say, the content of the film is an allegory of the latter's form, or to be more precise, the events within the film are an allegory of the latter's consumption—rather than of its production, which does not appear to interest Rothman much). The issue is therefore both objective and subjective: there is a historical question about film itself as a medium, and why it should be tempted by such involuted and secondary forms of self-designation which are most commonly associated with high modernism. The other question has to do with the allegorical method itself, and its possible symptomatic value as a

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replacement and substitute for some other impossible or undesirable practice of the interpretive process.

The possibility of an allegorical reading of film is of course given at once by the dual function of the camera itself, a duality less obvious or at least less easily articulated in other media:

> *Within the real world*, the camera represents the author's act of directing its framings, choosing the views to be presented to us. The camera is the instrument of a real relationship between author and viewer. Following Griffith, movies are designed to arouse the viewer, to make the viewer emotional. The film's author subjects the viewer to his power. *Within the world of film*, the camera has the power to penetrate its subjects' privacy, without their knowledge or authorization. Furthermore, it represents the author who creates and animates that world and presides over its "accidents," who wields a power of life and death over the camera's subjects (p. 102).

This duality, this relative separation of functions, makes possible an allegorical reconnection, a punctual conjoining of the two levels or narratives. Yet, as Rothman goes on to observe, the camera's master "is also impotent. Insofar as his place is behind the camera, he represents only a haunting, ghostly presence within the world it frames. He has no body: no one can meet his gaze. . . ." This second specification of the situation will then supply the "motivation" for the plot, give content to the designs the author has on us as viewers, and finally shape the drama of what Rothman will call the author's quest for *recognition*—something difficult to define and understand, except in terms of hero worship and the new star system offered by emergent *auteur* theory.

I think, however, that we must go further into the historical originality and structural peculiarity of the film-viewing process itself than is normally done (particularly in a period for which film viewing is not at all unnatural, but part of a very familiar and ordinary perceptual landscape). This would involve an estrangement of film viewing on the order of what MacLuhan and his school tried to do for the reading of printed books; and it is the great merit of Metz's *Imaginary Signifier* to have at least made a beginning in his description of this odd and specialized human activity:

> During the projection, the camera is absent, but it has a representative consisting of another apparatus, called precisely a "projector." An apparatus the spectator has behind him, *at the back of his head*, that is, precisely where phantasy locates the "focus" of all vision. All of us have experienced our own look, even outside the darkened theater, as a kind of searchlight turning on the axis of our own necks (like a pan) and shifting when we shift (a tracking shot now): as a cone of light . . . [our] identification with the movement of the camera be-

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> ing that of a transcendental, not an empirical subject. [Yet] all vision consists of a double movement: projective (the "sweeping" searchlight) and introjective: consciousness as a sensitive recording surface (as a screen). I have the impression at once that, to use a common expression, I am "casting" my eyes on things, and that the latter, thus illuminated, come to be deposited within me. . . . The technology of photography carefully conforms to this (banal) phantasy accompanying perception. The camera is "trained" on the object like a fire-arm (= projection) and the object arrives to make an imprint, a trace, on the receptive surface of the film-strip (= introjection). . . . During the performance the spectator is the searchlight I have described, duplicating the projector, which itself duplicates the camera, and he is also the sensitive surface duplicating the screen, which itself duplicates the film-strip. . . . When I say that I "see" the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release. . . . Releasing it, I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, which points and yet which records.[8]

This extraordinary account repositions Rothman's dramatic myth of recognition (all-powerful yet impotent) within the viewer and within the machinery of perception itself, while at the same time usefully insisting by its figures on the historical nature of that machinery and, as it were, suggesting that the human perceptual machine is constructed on the basis of its own mechanical products at any given moment rather than the other way around. However eternally true, in other words, the dialectic between passivity and activity within perception itself may be (Metz characterizes it as the screen versus the searchlight, but it is also easily identifiable as Abrams's romantic mirror and lamp), one might just as easily argue for the historical articulation or actualization of these functions by a material determinant such as the whole apparatus of film. The emblematic new technology would then have the effect, not necessarily of a cause, but certainly of a factor capable of exasperating an already latent tension and forcing its reorganization or rearticulation into a full-blown contradiction. This is then the sense in which something new and peculiar is being brought to "human reality" by immobilization within the darkened movie theater, some heightened coexistence between the now radically differentiated functions of the passive and the active which, owing to its very novelty as an experience, tends to convert itself into a privileged subject for the new artistic medium.

But one would also like to add a genealogical perspective in which the

8. Metz, pp. 49–51.

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medium (along with its own history, its own technological development) is grasped less as a source of innovation in its own right, than as the material reinforcement of an on-going tendency in social life as a whole. This is the tendency I have called *reification* elsewhere in the extremely broad sense of a gradual fragmentation and division of labor within the psyche, as the latter is retrained and reprogrammed by the reorganization of traditional labor processes and human activities by emergent capital. The sharp structural differentiation of active and passive *within* a single mental function—such as this new one of filmic perception—would then be seen as a historic intensification of the reification process, and one which could partially account for the privileged status of the new medium, for its gradual supersession of more traditional aesthetic languages. In our present context, however, that of the problems of interpretation, what should be noted about this historical perspective is the way in which, by means of the insertion of the mediatory code of reification and the division of labor, it becomes possible to transform the formalism of an autoreferential interpretation (the film's deepest subject as filmic perception proper) into a more complex historical and social one.

Much the same is true of the other obvious direction in which the thematics of reification leads, namely the fragmentation of the bodily sensorium and the reification of sight itself, the new hierarchy of the senses which in very uneven ways begins to emerge from Descartes and Galileo on (the primacy of the geometrical) until it becomes the dominant vehicle for the will to power of mature capitalism itself. The specular as a mode of domination and organization both of the outside world and of other people is a subject that has been richly explored by Sartre, and following him, by Foucault; although the thematics of the visual is probably more familiar in its Freudian form (the primal scene, fantasy as a specular process), particularly in contemporary film criticism. Yet a certain historical (and historicist) enrichment might be achieved if the mediation of "reification" were inserted here as well, together with a recognition that the emergence of seeing as a social dominant was the necessary precondition for its strategic functions in psychoanalytic models of the unconscious. This historical coordination of the two explanatory codes of the public and the private, of Marxism and Freudianism, is no less urgent when we deal with the contemporary "culture of the image." The reintroduction of historical issues about the bodily sensorium and perception itself would seem usefully to reground more abstract discussions about the construction of the subject.

The perspective I have been outlining is not one of an alternate *interpretation* to that of the type given us by Rothman, but rather a framework of evaluation in which such findings can themselves be more richly interpreted (and we have already seen this particular film critic approach such a perspective in his assimilation of the mysteries of the close-up to the phenomenon of the star system). Now, however, I want to reverse the problem and make a final, neces-

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sarily dogmatic, reflection on the interpretive operation we have examined in this interesting book. The observation will be dogmatic because it depends on a presupposition that cannot be defended in advance or a priori, namely that there exists for any given cultural artifact the possibility of something like a "concrete" analysis, an interpretation which retrieves the historical situation both of the text itself and of its interpreter, in such a way that it is finally capable of grounding or of justifying itself. Such a squaring of the interpretive or hermeneutic circle (sometimes called dialectical criticism) will however necessarily differ on the occasion of every text. It is therefore impossible to provide a model of the operation. This is not, in other words, a method.

I want to use this presupposition to suggest something I already proposed in the concluding section of *The Prison-House of Language*, namely that where, for whatever historical or ideological reason, such "concrete" criticism was impossible, the resultant formalism would attempt to correct itself by an operation which I described as the projection of form onto content, or better still, the transformation of a formal structure or feature into a type of content in its own right. Moralizing about this type of idealism is inappropriate, since the very attempt betrays an unconscious need for content proper, an unconscious awareness that one's reading is a purely formalizing one, a sense of the virtual chemical deficiency, the felt lack or absence of the material ground. Few examples of this process are quite so striking as *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze*, in which an initially inert and "meaningless" content—the elements of the murder plot proper—is allegorized into so many figures for the formal process of the film itself, which then—as the theme of the author, his supreme power, and his quest for recognition by the spectator-public—is triumphantly reimported into the filmic object as its deepest content and meaning.

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